

## **Hope, Trust, and Dreaming Big: Student-Athlete Identity and Athletic Divisional Reclassification**

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### *Abstract*

Intercollegiate athletics are an indelible aspect of American higher education, and many collegiate athletes, particularly those at the Division I level, view their college careers as an extension of and springboard toward a professional sports career. This study is based on a series of semi-structured interviews with men's athletic administrators and male student-athletes at an institution seeking to reclassify from Division II to Division I status. Results suggest athletic identity, or the degree to which one's self-identity had considerable bearing on their reasoning for choosing to accept an athletic scholarship at the school, the focus of their attention while enrolled, and their career aspirations following the end of their collegiate playing careers. Results further showed a clear focus on sport over school despite a language supporting the idea of learning.

## *Introduction*

Athletic programs and student-athletes can have an immediate and sometimes longitudinal impact on the prestige accorded to their colleges and universities, particularly at the Division I level. This level of competition and exposure carries with it the potential for significant revenue from television, print and social media. Further, while few athletic programs are financially self-sufficient, they can be effective tools for enhancing enrollment numbers and increasing the public's profile of an institution. The lucrative nature of college sports reflects a thinking that the more competitive and visible the sports program, the greater the potential positive impact on the institution. This is particularly true for comprehensive universities with historically regional connections, and the thinking that by increasing the profile of its athletic competitions, the institution will be seen more of as a national institution instead of a regional institution. This desire to be a higher-profile, competitive, national institution can have both positive and negative impacts on the institution and, in particular, it can impact how student-athletes see themselves, how they behave, and what kinds of decisions they make.

This presentation is based on a study that explored the impact of an institution's transition (i.e, reclassification) from a mid-level competition (NCAA Division II) to a higher-level of competition (NCAA Division I) on student-athletes at a master's comprehensive university in the southeast. Specifically, the study focused on the athletic identity of student-athletes who were recruited to the institution with the aspirations and intention of being on a nationally competitive and visible basketball team.

## *Background of the Study*

### *College Athletics*

Intercollegiate athletics have evolved from small beginnings in the early 1800s that allowed for student physical activity (Twale & Korn, 2009) to becoming a significant part of a multi-billion dollar entertainment industry (Sperber, 2000). Today's college sports involve nearly 400,000 student-athletes (NCAA Guide for College-Bound Athletes, 2007), and these activities are governed by several oversight bodies. The largest and most far-reaching of the oversight bodies is the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). The NCAA oversees hundreds of institutions. In order to create a more equitable playing field, the NCAA has created a series of divisions that it allows institutions to participate in and voluntarily affiliate with. These divisions are based largely on willingness to commit financial resources and, as a result, attract varying levels of athletes, with the most competitive and most elite athletes enrolling in NCAA Division I athletic programs.

The NCAA is a national voluntary association that develops and implements rules for games and conduct of institutions. This body also coordinates when and how student-athletes can be recruited, what grades and academic requirements must be met while in college, and how and when sports teams can compete. The NCAA also coordinates and governs post-season play, tournaments, and championships. The most visible of the NCAA divisions, Division I, is comprised of typically the largest universities in the United States who are willing to expend the most money to participate in sports programs. Institutions such as the University of Alabama, an affiliated member of the NCAA's Division I, spend \$124 million dollars on sports annually (Upton, Berkowitz, & Gillum, 2010). Institutions such as these benefit from having their games televised, and the result is often added revenue and exposure for the institution, with a resulting

impact of placing the institution in the nation's conscious, in essence, defining and branding the institution.

The NCAA similarly works with lower division programs, Division II and Division III programs, and it has been lauded for its organization of many of their post-season and championship tournaments. These institutions, however, typically have much smaller budgets, receive much less money for playing their games, and subsequently experience fewer benefits or opportunities for national branding of their schools as their Division I counterparts. One result is the creation of an environment where institutions see numerous advantages to changing divisions in the hopes of increasing both their visibility and their revenue sources.

### *Reclassification of Divisions*

The notion of institutional reclassification within the NCAA is based on one of two theoretical constructs. First, the notion of modifying and adapting an institution's programs and offerings to comply best with the society and community that hosts the institution, the notion of institutional adaptation (Sporn, 1999), could be the driving force for a school to alter what it is doing. By changing the peer-group of the institution and the products that the institution offers, the party is in fact adapting to a changing society where visibility and growth and an institution growing and changing simply for ego fulfillment. Birnbaum (1988) offered a discussion of ego-driven institutional change, noting that this is both how institutions are capable of becoming more than they currently are, or investing vital resources and never fully realizing a viable return on their investment. The potential has been documented, however, that participation in NCAA Division I basketball can result in additional television revenue and an increase in student admission applications (Pope & Pope, 2009).

Institutional reclassification is not a new phenomenon in higher education circles. Institutions have frequently moved between competitive levels to make better use of their resources, to incur less travel between competing institutions, or in the hope of attaining greater visibility as well as the recruitment of more talented students (both academically and athletically). As such, more Division I schools offer more opportunities for student-athletes, an opportunity that for some, correlates in their minds as a necessary stepping stone to their goal of becoming a professional athlete.

None of the divisions offered by the NCAA are immune from problems associated with rule compliance or student-athlete behavior. Shulman and Bowen (2001), for example, noted that many Division III institutions that were highly selective liberal arts colleges recruited, accepted, and enrolled student-athletes with inferior academic backgrounds, presumably for the sake of being more competitive versus opponents. And as Sanders, Gardner, and Jones (2009) noted, many institutions engage in admitting lesser academically prepared students who have the promise of being successful athletes. These practices also require a different network of support services for student-athletes in the higher divisions of the NCAA. Thus, as an institution elevates from a lower level to a higher level of affiliation, additional resources will need to be made available to its student-athletes to facilitate their academic and personal success.

The addition of new sports, more student-athletes, additional academic resources, and enhanced facilities also requires additional challenges and resources that must be made available to student-athletes. Student-athletes in higher divisions often require enhanced academic support (DiBartolo & Shaffer, 2002), support and counselor for drug and alcohol issues (Hildebrand, Johnson, & Bogle, 2001), and even specialized resources for international student-athletes (Kissinger, 2009). One view is that the student-athlete, at progressively higher levels of

competition, requires different types of resources to both acclimate to an institution and to be successful in competition, in the classroom, and in life. For a student-athlete, advancing from a lower to higher division school for the purpose of achieving their athletic goals can have greater identity or added revenue sources must also look to the welfare of the student-athlete as a primary area of concern (Kissinger & Miller, 2009).

### *Research Methods*

During a site visit to the case study institution, nineteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with men's athletic administrators and male student-athletes who had been actively recruited to play basketball at the college. The interview protocol was developed from the counseling and psychological literature on athletic identity and it was pilot tested with athletic administrators and student-athletes at an alternate institution.

All interviews were completed privately in one-on-one settings and the student-athletes in particular were assured of their complete anonymity. The interviews were transcribed and compared to field notes taken during the interviews, checking to ensure for accuracy of their intended comments. All transcripts and field notes were examined by multiple researchers using a constant comparison method and the identified thematic clusters were compared and negotiated between multiple sources to develop a consensus-based theme.

Although data provided a rich context for multiple discussions of the process for transitioning from a NCAA Division II to a NCAA Division I athletic program, the primary focus of the current study was to examine and describe how student-athletes were impacted by this transition process. Special attention was given to how student-athletes perceived themselves, and to the administrative challenges that the institution had to confront for transition purposes. By describing these transition issues, other comprehensive universities that are

considering investing in higher profile athletic programs may learn important lessons on how to more effectively embrace the challenges associated with such change.

### *Findings*

Based on an analysis of the interview transcripts, four prominent themes arose that reflected the challenges of transitioning from NCAA Division II to NCAA Division I status. These challenges, although unique to the comprehensive institution in the study, appeared applicable to other comprehensive universities seeking to use their athletic program as a potential tool to enhance institution visibility and foster public prominence.

*Academic Progress:* The first theme to arise from the interviews related to the emphasis placed on the athletes achieving satisfactory academic progress. Although satisfactory academic progress is a significant challenge facing all college students, NCAA guidelines are specific about the progress that student-athletes in Division I must exhibit each year. This regulation has roots in the early-1990s as part of a major athletic reform movement (Newman, 1994).

One student-athlete commented:

I was shocked at how much emphasis is placed on getting a degree. I mean it's not bad, it's what we are here for, but it's about getting a degree, not really what the degree is in or what I'm going to do with it. They just really make sure, like, that we have the right number of hours and number of classes and that kind of stuff. They don't watch me go to class, but Coach says that we will all be in trouble if we aren't doing good with our academics.

Another student-athlete said:

Yea, going to class is important and all, but its like Coach and them just want to make sure that we don't embarrass anybody. When I played D2, it was like nobody talked about it very much, but now, its like all the time, get your classes in or you gotta go to summer school.

Comments such as these were common throughout all of the interviews, as other student-athletes offered statements such as "I never before had this feeling like we had to graduate," and

“I’m going to the NBA, so it’s not as important for me, but Coach wants everybody to be making their way to graduate from here.” These comments also further the common notion that many athlete attend for primarily (at least originally) athletic reasons. The apparent shock about the focus on academics at a school with a Division I athletics program (or seeking DI status) is consistent with research showing the challenges inherent in balancing more rigorous academic and athletic demands (i.e., Adler & Adler, 1985; Miller & Kerr, 2002). The comments also coincide with research suggesting the predominant focus on athletics for Division I student-athletes, particularly among those with stronger athletic identities (Strum et al. 2011). In other words, student-athletes may focus more intently on academics, while athlete-students, or those with predominant athletic identities, may primarily value athletic success (Lally, 2005; Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2014). Their comments also highlight the importance for student-athletes to receive early and on-going guidance on academic and post-athletic career issues, especially those seen as beholden to their athletic identity.

*Financial Aid Management:* Six student-athletes and one administrator all commented that monitoring, following, discussing, and processing financial aid packages was significantly more time consuming and at issue with daily life in the transition from Division II from Division I. The athletic administrator commented that “because the university is paying more for these students – or really, just comping their tuition and fees – they expect a whole lot more, you know, from the athletes.” He implied, as well, that the institution expected the basketball program to generate revenue to cover expenses, if not in the short term, then in the next few years. A student-athlete said “yea, you know, they are basically paying us to be here and the coaches are like, you know, telling us that we have to earn our scholarships every day.” Another student-athlete referenced an encounter with an administrator who said “he was like, you guys



are getting a full ride because you are DI now, and you need to win. He said that the university is making a big investment in our scholarships and that everybody wants us to be in the NCAA [tournament] soon.”

Another student-athlete said:

I had an offer to go DII, but it was like a quarter of the tuition and I didn't see it, like, making any difference in where I go after college. If I get in the NBA, I'm going to give something back to this place because, you know, they are paying me now. They make a big deal about having us sign stuff and go over rules, but it comes down to they feel like they are giving us something important.

An interesting element implied within this theme is the sense that student-athletes feel varying levels of pressure to perform athletically given the financial incentives accorded to them via their scholarships. While many non-athlete students experience performance pressures to maintain academic scholarships, most casual observers of college athletes and athletic departments may be surprised to hear the financial incentives of athletic scholarships cause them distress, may at times be used by coaches or administrators to pressure or motivate student-athletes, or that athletic scholarships are not the “all inclusive” and secure financial gifts that those outside the athletic domain often perceive. These comments also add weight to the idea that student-athletes face issues unique from their non-athlete peers (Parham, 1993) that could impede their social and intellectual development (Broughton & Neyer, 2001; Etzel, Pinkney, & Hinkle, 1994; Ferrante, Etzel, & Lantz, 1996).

*Post-Collegiate Life:* Another recurring theme mentioned by eight of the nine basketball players had to do with what they would be doing after they graduated from college. Comments typically focused on the added advantage of a possible professional athletic career after having been a participant in a Division I athletic program. One student commented, “being at a D-1 school, you know, will really help me out in the [NBA] draft.” Other student-athletes were a bit

more ambiguous about a perceived correlation between a career in professional sports and attending a Division I school. For example, one basketball player said:

I don't know what I'm going to do after my eligibility is up. I mean I'm in education, so I could teach, but having played in a D-1 environment, that gets you more looks, you know. Scouts appreciate D-1 schools more than others types, I mean, if you are good, you are good and you'll go [to the NBA], but being here, at a D-1 school where only the really best get to play, well that says something. So I can fall back on teaching and coaching, but I'm sure I'll get some looks.

Another student-athlete commented that playing in a Division I university allowed him to showcase his talents by playing other teams at the same level.

Being D-1 is it. You play in the big time, Ohio State, UCLA, teams that are really seen by everybody. Some of our games are packed, over 20,000 fans watching me. That's a huge difference than playing in D-2 or 3 where you might get, like, 500 people there. So it doesn't really matter that much if we win or lose, because, like, you are out there on the court and you are seen by lots of coaches, the media, and scouts. To play at the next level, it's what you have to do.

The theme of a professional sports career as their preferred career choice was both common and consistent with student-athletes with high athletic identities (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). Therefore, although there are contrary findings (Brown & Hartley, 1998) (Kornspan & Etzel, 2001) those working with student-athletes should also monitor for athletic identity foreclosure (Beamon, 2012; Harrison et al., 2011), which could mitigate their exploration or interest in non-athletic careers (Griffith & Johnson, 2002; Houle, 2011; Martens & Cox, 2000; Peterson, Sampson, Lenz, & Reardon, 2002; Savickas, 1999; Shachar, Brewer, Cornelius, & Petipas, 2004). Since only 1.2% of college athletes were drafted by the NBA (NCAA, 2014), failure to address the role of athletic identity with student-athletes could have significant implications on a student-athlete's future.

*Student Development:* A core of each identified theme, a final theme that arose from the interview data was the developmental nature of being a college student and participating in

sports. One coach referred to it as players “growing up,” and an administrator talked vaguely about what the student-athletes would do after college, but it was the student-athletes themselves that referred most to the idea that they had to pay attention to what would happen after they were finished with college. One basketball player’s comments encapsulated the entire idea of college student development by saying:

I’m here to play basketball. That’s it. I don’t bleed blue or anything like that, being here is about playing ball, getting noticed, and getting the pay. I’ll probably make it to the NBA, but a lot of the guys I play with won’t. They’ll have to figure out what to do, like maybe they can coach or something or work in a front office. They’ll have to figure out what to do and maybe get a good major to get a good job. They’ll have to find out what life is like for someone who is not the star player. I don’t know if they can do it, because like for me, I’ve thought about what I would do if I don’t make it.

Super (1990) suggested that one’s adolescent identity, coupled with the activities in which one engages from ages 18-24 are the critical factors involved in career choice. Thus, it isn’t surprising that student-athletes we interviewed, most of whose adolescent activities were filled with athletic practices and events, revealed a high level of athletic identity. However, as the final comment suggests, some student-athletes may experience athletic identity foreclosure, which occurs when their self-worth and definition are linked almost exclusively with their athletics endeavors (Beamon, 2012). In such cases, student-athletes may react impassively or even negatively to any suggestion of a career outside athletics. No matter the level of stated athletic identity, there does appear to be perception among student-athletes that career guidance was limited. Although not generalizable outside this small sample of student-athletes, it does appear that while student-athletes received career guidance, their conversations with athletic personnel revolved primarily around their athletic endeavors. Although based on a small sample size, our findings are a consistent reminder of the need for academic and athletic advisors and personnel to engage student-athletes in early and ongoing exploration of their career interests and

goals no matter the student-athletes level of personal commitment to a professional sports career. Moreover, discussions about post-athletic career goals must consider and attend to the unique influence of athletic identity on a student-athlete's career goals throughout their collegiate years (Blustein & Phillips, 1994; Brewer, 1993; Husman & Shell, 2008; Griffith & Johnson, 2002; Kissinger, 2009; Webster, 2011).

It is important to note that administrators also referenced the idea of student growth while in college. One coach said that the process of playing basketball at the Division I level is about "learning you are not superman," and that "there are a lot of studs out there." The implication was that while a basketball player might come into college believing that he would end up playing in the NBA, the process of winning and losing games would ultimately help the student learn that other options might be more feasible. An athletic administrator said:

The kids learn it. When you get blown out, they see it. They have to. There are some great college ball players and when you see enough of them, you begin to understand that there are D-1 programs and then there are D-1 programs. Not all of us are created equal. But over time, our kids will compete and some won't and in the end, it's about learning to grow up and become responsible for your own actions and your own future, even if it's not in the NBA.

Importantly, comments from both the student and administrators considered the student-athlete's development during their college years. Although the developmental needs of student-athletes were more conceptual than pragmatic, it is important to note that both the student-athlete and administrator frame the developmental themes within the context of athletics. While this does not exclude either's awareness or understanding of broader developmental themes, it does illustrate a tendency to frame responses initially and prominently within an athletic context. These positions are particularly relevant when coupled with research noting that athletic identity has cognitive, affective, and behavioral components (Brewer et al., 1993) and can be viewed from social, occupation, and personal perspectives (Pearlin, 1983; Astle, 1986). In essence,

while developmental themes are noted by student-athletes and administrators alike, they rely on sports themed catchphrases that fail to critically examine the complex nature of identity, substantially increasing the likelihood of an incomplete assessment of the student-athlete's development.

### *Discussion and Conclusion*

Intercollegiate athletics provide tremendous opportunity for student-athlete to earn a college degree. In exchange, student-athletes are expected to engage in a relentless schedule of academic and academic activities. Balancing these requirements is difficult even for the most capable students. However, student-athletes with self-identities rooted in their athletic achievement, the college experience may be seen as more of a springboard to a career as a professional athlete than an opportunity to secure an education and seek a career and life outside sports.

Although the major themes identified in our study offer support to previous research on the student-athlete experience, it also highlights a lesser known perspective on the student-athlete experience that has received less attention in the sports literature. That is, the perspective of student-athletes whose school choice and playing career was influenced by their school and athletic program's was seeking reclassification from Division II to Division I status with the NCAA.

Overall, our findings support the view that many student-athletes, particularly those at the highest echelons of college athletics (i.e., DI), hold strong athletic identities and view their college playing careers as a springboard for becoming a professional athlete. Our results are also consistent with research suggesting that male basketball players may be more inclined to foreclose on an athletic identity, a position consistent with significant problems transitioning into

non-athletic environments and careers. Although not unique to this study, our results do highlight the importance for athletic departments and coaches to recognize the unique that the reclassification opportunities are seen as a clear and present means for student-athlete to realize their dream of becoming a professional athlete. And as noted in our results, the predominant “sports first” theme was grounded in the student-athlete’s perception of their role and responsibilities as principally athletic in nature.

Increased attention on college athletics must incorporate the college athlete as a person and student in order to be successful, which requires a more intentional examination of cause of the identity, especially athletic identity. Thus, our study adds but a piece to a much larger and more complex understanding of the college student athlete experience. A piece that further illustrates the need to view the athletic talent and success (and failure) of college athletes as a part of their overall worth and future successes.

It is important to note that we are suggesting that a Division I standing is easily attained, maintained, or inherently negative. Higher education institutions, college athletes and non-athletes, their alumni and friends, and certainly American society as a whole reap untold personal, financial, and social benefits from activities surrounding college athletes and athletics. Nevertheless, our findings, along with other research, clearly suggest that athletic identity is integral to understanding college athletes. By doing so, academic and athletic department personnel will increase their awareness of the student-athlete and be better prepared to optimize their current and future personal, academic, athletic, and career successes.

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